

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 292 128

CS 211 108

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TITLE The Pleasures of Voices in the Literary Essay:
Explorations in the Prose of Gretel Ehrlich and
Richard Selzer.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Conference on College Composition and Communication
(38th, Atlanta, GA, March 19-21, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides -
Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) --
Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism;
*Literary Devices; Literary Styles; Literature;
Narration; Reading Writing Relationship; *Rhetorical
Invention; Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Author Text Relationship; Narrative Text; Text
Factors; *Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Voice is a useful critical concept for studying texts, and can be classified into three types: (1) audible voice--how much the reader "hears" the text; (2) dramatic voice--what kind of speaker or writer is implied in the text; and (3) one's own voice--the relationship of the text to the actual writer. Written language is more likely to be heard if it uses the syntax, rhythms, and word-choice characteristic of speech. Certain textual clues, such as short simple sentences or sentences which give the sense of mental activity, also call attention to the audibility of a text. The dramatic dimension of a text can derive from the audible voice, but even in the absence of an audible voice, the voice of the implied author is present. There are three aspects to one's own, or the actual writer's, voice: (1) a distinctive, recognizable voice; (2) "having a voice" or "having the authority to speak"; and (3) "authentic voice" or resonance, meaning the relationship of the text to the real author as opposed to the implied author. The writings of Gretel Ehrlich and Richard Selzer effectively illustrate all senses of voice. (Sixteen references are appended.) (MM)

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THE PLEASURES OF VOICES IN THE LITERARY ESSAY:

EXPLORATIONS IN THE PROSE OF GRETEL EHRLICH AND RICHARD SELZER

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC):"

[To appear in Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy.
Editor, Chris Anderson. Southern Illinois University Press.]

We write not with the fingers but with the whole person.

Virginia Woolf. Orlando

It's hard not to talk about writing as though it were speech: in discussing silent texts we talk about the "voice" or "tone of voice"; also about "the speaker" and about what we "hear" a piece of writing "saying." Diverse critics even refer to a writer as having "found her voice."

Influential modern figures have rejected the psychological or metaphysical implications of voice and given us critical terms which seek to separate the "voice" or "character" or "ethos" in a text from the actual author or writer or self behind the text: Pound's "persona," Yeats' "mask," Booth's "implied author."

Next come postmoderns to insist that there is no such thing as a self or author behind the text--either to be revealed or concealed by the text. But when these critics kill off the author, they merely inject new life into voice: the text is nothing but voices. (Yet all discourse may be called "writing.")

Though voice has become more than ever an unclear and controversial notion, I will try to show that we need the term. Voice will become a useful critical concept for the study of texts once we build up a foundation of analysis and application--a foundation I seek to work on in this essay. I can make the term much more serviceable by distinguishing three kinds of voice: (1) Audible voice: how much do we hear the text as we read it? (2) Dramatic voice: what kind of speaker or writer is implied in the text (and how vividly)? (3) One's own voice: what is the relation of the text to the actual writer? I will illustrate these senses of voice with examples from Ehrlich and Selzer.

(1) Audible voice: How much do we hear the text?

Robert Frost said that the distinguishing mark of good prose is "the speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination" (Introduction). Though texts are literally silent, some texts make us hear someone's voice. Admittedly, we can "sound out" any text and thus inject audible voice into it, but only some texts seem to make this sound for us. Texts with audible voice give us the sense of a sound coming up from the page by itself; and they seem to give us energy rather than requiring energy of us. I highlight here the uttered dimension of written language as opposed to the constructed or composed dimension: the aural and experienced-in-time dimension as opposed to the visual and experienced-in-space dimension.

Perhaps the best illustration of audible voice is the radical absence of it. The classic examples tend to come from government documents, army manual

instructions, bureaucratic memos.* But garden variety inaudible prose is all around us in all the lifeless or tangled writing we cannot avoid having to read.

Because Selzer and Ehrlich are full of audible prose, they provide a good occasion for extended analysis of what turns out to be a rich question: where does this sound--or illusion of sound--come from?

The most obvious source is speech itself. I suspect research will bear me out in saying that written language is more likely to be heard if it uses the syntax, rhythms, and word-choice characteristic of speech. For example, here's how Selzer begins an essay:

I heard the other day that Hugh Franciscus had died (Letters 21).

And here's how Ehrlich starts her book:

It's May and I've just awakened from a nap... Winter lasts six months here (Solace 1).

These writers endow their prose with audible voice by using the syntax and diction of speech. (Admittedly, "awakened" is not something we usually say.)

But consider this passage from Selzer:

Not for me the festive air of the death bed. No, thanks. I can wait for the wonders of eternity. Wrap me not in tranquil joy. A shot of penicillin will do just fine (Letters 146).

Of course audibility comes from the little bursts of speech-like syntax and diction ("No thanks," "I can wait," "A shot of penicillin will do just fine."). But what interests me is the audibility of the mannered and artificial sentences that we would never speak: "Not for me the festive air": "Wrap me not in tranquil joy." Why do we hear these phrases? The term 'sonorous' comes to hand, pointing literally at what we are investigating: sound. Rhythmic, iambic, pithy, poetic. Selzer loves cadences from Shakespeare and the King James translation which our ears are accustomed to hearing sonorously declaimed from the stage and the pulpit.

Thus it's important to note that something completely different from speech can nevertheless be experienced as audible and have a strong "uttered" or existing-in-time quality--if it is has the right kinds of rhythms, parallels, and echoes. I'm guessing that most readers would find the following example audible even though they'd never uttered or heard or spoken such a massively left-branching syntactic structure:

Because these men work with animals, not machines or numbers, because

*From a letter from a stock company:

In connection with the Offer to Purchase for Cash All Outstanding Units of Beneficial Interest of American Royalty Trust (the "Unit Offer") and the Offer to Purchase All Outstanding Shares of Common Stock, \$3.33 Cumulative Convertible Preferred Stock, \$2.28 Cumulative Preferred Stock and \$1.65 Cumulative Preferred Stock (the "Stock Offer") each dated August 7, 1986 by FPCO Inc., PETRO-LEWIS CORPORATION (the "Company"), and, in the case of the Unit Offer, American Royalty Producing Company ("ARPCO") and PLC-ARPC, Inc. ("PLC-ARPC"), by letters dated August 7, 1986 (the "Recommendation Letters"), have conveyed their recommendations regarding the Unit Offer and the Stock Offer.

~~they are outside the boundaries of corporate law, and are not~~

they live outside in landscapes of torrential beauty, because they are confined to a place and a routine embellished with awesome variables, because calves die in the arms that pulled others into life, because they go to the mountains as if on a pilgrimage to find out what makes a herd of elk tick, their strength is also a softness, their toughness, a rare delicacy (Ehrlich, Solace 52-3).

Musicians say that certain passages "lie under the fingers." They mean that the notes are very playable. However unspeechlike, that sentence by Ehrlich is very sayable.

For another source of audibility, consider next two versions of a passage about morning:

Morning. Blue air comes ringed with coyotes. The ewes wake clearing their communal throats like old men. Lambs shake their flop-eared heads at leaves of grass, negotiating the blade (Ehrlich, Solace 56).

In the morning when blue air comes ringed with coyotes, the ewes wake clearing their communal throats like old men, while the lambs shake their flop-eared heads at leaves of grass, negotiating the blade. (My transformation.)

My hunch is that most of us would hear Ehrlich's version more. We could say that its short simple sentences are more speech-like than the long embedded sentence. Yet no one would ever speak such poetic sentences, however short. It's my guess that the real source of audibility is this: Ehrlich's simple sentences give us the experience of mental activity going on--whereas the single embedded sentence gives more of an experience of a completed experience or thought. (Walter Ong relates oral discourse to "language as event" and written discourse to "language as record.")

Think about sentence combining exercises which ask students to combine or embed simple sentences:

He stepped on the gas. The car surged forward.
becomes
After stepping on the gas, the car surged forward.

Notice how this combining serves to undermine voice and energy and mental activity. We have changed thought-going-on into thought-having-gone-on.

Another source of audible voice in texts: textual cues that heighten our sense of the a person in there--someone at home, someone making that language. For example:

Take Dom Pietro. Eighteen years in a monastery and he has remained a personage. I can see him carried across the Piazza San Marco . . . shedding benedictions on the crowd. Listen: . . . (and Selzer goes off on an illustrative anecdote). (Repairs 18).

What interests me is "Take Dom Pietro" and "Listen." Yes, those two short sentences are speech-like, but more than that, they call attention to their status as speech acts.

Admittedly all discourse is a speech act--not just a saying but a doing; not just an assertion in the realm of meaning but an acting in the realm of people. Speech act theory shows us that we haven't described discourse if we've just described the

meaning and language itself: we've left something out till we've also described who is trying to do what to whom--and in what setting. Nevertheless, writing--especially poor writing--has a tendency to be remarkably effective at seeming to belie speech-act theory--at hiding its status as an act. Writing often suffers from the sense that no one is trying to do anything to anyone, that there's no context, and thus that there's nothing but "language" sitting there asserting meaning under its own auspices.

The paradigm example of non-speech act language is the grammar book example, e.g., "The cat is on the mat." No one is saying it. Notice how it gets a speaker and becomes audible when it reads "I promise that the cat is on the mat." When prose calls attention to itself as a speech act--language doing, not just saying--it usually heightens our sense of audible voice.

Thus every time a writer writes, "Notice that..." or "What I'm arguing is..." or "Let me now turn to..." she is calling attention on the silent page to the speech act she's performing--thus heightening our sense of her presence as a person acting on us. Usually this heightens the audible voice. This effect is stronger if she actually refers to herself or to the reader. And stronger still if she uses first person for herself and second person for the reader. Thus notice the progression here:

Warm clothing will be needed for the trip.
The organizer urges participants to bring plenty of warm clothing.
I urge you to bring plenty of warm clothing.

My subject here is not energy in general but voice in particular--one kind of energy. But it's worth noting that when a text has audible voice we experience the text as providing the energy to make a noise--the energy to make the meaning come up off the page. When words record thinking going on rather than completed thought--or when words call attention to the speech act involved--then we experience the text as having energy.

One of the strong sources of audibility in Ehrlich is her fresh and interesting metaphors. For example,

A front is pulling the huge sky over me (1).

But why should sound be increased by metaphors (or at least some metaphors)? Consider these two sentences:

The table is stationary.
The table lurks stationary.

Notice how "lurks" as a metaphor doesn't just animate the table, it animates the writer. It heightens our sense of the presence of an active consciousness at work in the text--exerting a force on her material.

The principle here, then, is that audible voice is increased by words which call attention to the presence of the person writing. Thus the second sentence below will probably be slightly more audible because of the mere change of one adjective--a change that signals the feelings of the writer.

The government food was distributed throughout the district.
The hateful food was distributed throughout the district.

And so when Ehrlich writes, "Winter lasts six months here," she is making her sentence more audible than if she had written, "Winter lasts six months in

Wyoming." "Here" calls attention to a particular person writing from a particular place and situation. "Winter lasts six months in Wyoming" could be a sentence in an almanac--words as it were from nobody to nobody.

Though I'm obviously celebrating the pleasures of audible voice, I'm not saying it's enough by itself to make writing good. The following sentence may be full of audible voice, but if it were found in a serious essay about the causes of the French Revolution, it would have to be judged bad for not doing the task.

I'm sitting here looking at the cursor on my screen. It's blinking at me as much as to say, "What are the causes of the French Revolution."

(2) Dramatic Voice: What Kind of Person is Implied in the Text?

The sound of a spoken voice can tell us who is talking. Think of phone calls from people we've not seen in years when we instantly recognize who it is. "Voice prints" are said to be more reliable than finger prints. But more to the point here, the sound of a voice seems to tell us what kind of person is talking. That is, we often feel we can hear someone's character or personality in the way she speaks. Thus another species of pleasure in voice is the pleasure of sensing character in the text. This is voice as character, ethos, persona, mask, or implied author.*

The most obvious cues about this dramatic dimension of the text usually come from the audible voice or speech qualities. But even where there is no audible voice there is still this second dimension of voice as character. Wayne Booth uses the term 'implied author' to stress that every text implies a character who produces those words. Just as there is no day without weather, however boring, so there is no text without implied author, however nondescript.

But even though we can infer an implied author in any text, it's important to note that not every text has an implied author or dramatic voice as it were to the same degree. In some texts the ethos or implied author jumps out at us; the persona is vivid and dramatically realized (even if he is a quiet sort of person). In other texts we have to infer and indeed create that implied author.

Also, in some texts the implied author is consistent, whereas in others we may get mixed cues. Such inconsistency is characteristic of pieces by inexperienced writers or joint authors. Faint, inconsistent, or complex cues will make readers disagree more in their inferences about implied author.

And so, just as all texts can be sounded audibly but some seem to give us their sound, so too all texts can yield character or ethos but some seem to give the character. The terms 'character', 'persona', and 'mask' all come from drama, and voice as character serves as the dramatic dimension of a text. When that dramatic dimension is strong--when we experience the implied author or persona as vivid and interesting and coherent--we tend to experience that as a virtue in the writing (though of course writing can be good without this virtue). Thus textbooks are characteristically dreary because they lack any strong implied author or persona or dramatic voice.

*For the sake of this analysis, I neglect the subtle but important distinctions between ethos, implied author, and persona. For a rich summary analysis of these terms, see Nan Johnson, Roger Cherry.

Perhaps we shouldn't use the term voice for this dimension of texts when we already have so many other terms to refer to the kind of person that a text implies. But even if we wanted to, we couldn't stamp out what is in fact the most common sense of voice when applied to texts. More positively, I find that one of the best ways to figure out the character of the implied author is to ask, "what kind of voice do you hear in there?" This question is especially helpful in teaching.

Let's ask it then of Ehrlich. What kind of voice do we hear in the two following passages?

It's May and I've just awakened from a nap, curled against sagebrush the way my dog taught me to sleep--sheltered from wind. A front is pulling the huge sky over me, and from the dark a hailstone has hit me on the head. I'm trailing a band of two thousand sheep across a stretch of Wyoming badlands, a fifty-mile trip that takes five days because sheep shade up in hot sun and won't budge until it's cool. Bunched together now, and excited into a run by the storm, they drift across dry land, tumbling into draws like water and surge out again onto the rugged, choppy plateaus that are the building blocks of this state (Consolation 1).

To emerge from isolation can be disorienting. Everything looks bright, new, vivid. After I had been herding sheep for only three days, the sound of the camp tender's pickup flustered me. Longing for human company, I felt a foolish grin take over my face; yet I had to resist an urgent temptation to run and hide (Consolation 5).

I hear a somewhat flat voice: a bit tight-lipped; a refusal to be graceful; an insistence on somewhat muscularly shoving words together without much lubrication or comfortable rhythm. In describing people who live in Wyoming, Ehrlich happened to describe something of her own voice: "Sentence structure [here] is shortened to the skin and bones of a thought" (6). "People here feel pride because they live in such a harsh place..." (3).

We hear something of the voice of Walker Gibson's "tough guy" (Tough 28-24). Here it's someone who lets us know she's been around, endured hard things we probably haven't endured, who is in fact interested in feelings but tends to avoid much direct talk or sustained attention to them. She doesn't seem to trust the traditional, graceful, and sonorous cadences that Selzer often uses. Her voice often seems stripped down where his sounds dressed up. Yet she lets in little blips of lyricism, and in the end there is considerable honest self-revelation. But where Selzer comes up close to us, as it were, and puts his arm around our shoulder and speaks with an intonation of personal feeling, Ehrlich's personal revelations have a kind of flat, blurted, distant quality. It's as though she's saying, "I'll tell you about my inner life as long as you stay over there on the other side of the room. And I'm not going to tell it all at once. I'll only let it out in bits and pieces--and keep changing the subject."

The ordinary way to describe this rich voice is to say that we hear a complex character with many dimensions or sides--a voice that is moving in its complexity. But--taking take a leaf from Bakhtin--we could designate these "sides" as, themselves, "voices" in a polyphonic self:

- A laconic tough guy who refuses to name feelings.
- Sudden infusions of a deft lyrical voice.
- Notes of a metaphysical, playfully intellectual voice such as in "negotiating the blade."

--Occasional soundings of long periodic poetic voice--unsubtle, heavier.

(3) One's own Voice: What is the Relation of the Text to the Actual Writer?

This is slippery territory. I will explore a cluster of three phenomena linked to the phrase "one's own voice"--leaving open for now the question as to whether this is one entity or a family of related ones: (a) One's own voice as a "distinctive, recognizable voice." (b) One's own voice as "having a voice" or "having the authority to speak." (c) One's own voice as "authentic voice" or "resonance."

(3a) One's own voice as a distinctive, recognizable voice.

Even the best critics sometimes speak of a writer "finding her own voice." (Helen Vendler says it of Sylvia Plath--describing how she went beyond sounding like Dylan Thomas ["Intractable Metal" 131].) People use this common locution to mean that the writer has attained a distinctive style that sets her off from others. One of the pleasures of reading is to get to know an author with her own voice--and to hear that voice again even in new and somewhat different material. "Having one's own voice" in this sense means, I suppose, that the writer creates a recognizable, consistent, and (usually) unique, implied author--as I'd say that Ehrlich does in her book. Selzer in his many books shows more variation in voice. ("Distinctive, recognizable voice" is sometimes used in a narrower sense to mean that the writer's textual voice resembles her speaking voice.)

(3b) One's own voice as "having a voice" or "having the authority to speak."

When a writer finds her own voice in the sense just used--finds a style that seems hers--she often takes on a certain added assurance or authority. This relates to the fact that when we say someone "has a voice in something," we mean she has some power, "has a say," or can "speak out." In fact the phrase "having a voice" sometimes means explicitly "having a vote" or "having the official sanction to speak." The authority dimension of voice is most striking if we look at the negative case: people who somehow experience themselves as voiceless. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" Notice that this classic jibe is always spoken by someone with authority to someone without--usually an adult to a child.

When someone has no voice in this sense, he may experience himself as having lots to say but unable to say it; or he may experience himself as empty. But when he "finds a voice" it's as though a cork were pulled out: he speaks up, speaks out, says his piece. He experiences himself as having lots to say. Sometimes he realizes in retrospect that he did have lots to say earlier even though he had experienced himself as empty. Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olson speak of women finding themselves without voice. (See also Belenky et. al. Women's Ways of Knowing.)

Voicelessness may stem from not getting enough respect and support. After all, it is hard to speak if you feel you will not be heard or taken seriously. People also experience themselves as voiceless because they don't "have the lingo"--don't know how to use the accepted voice or discourse of the community. But notice how undamaged children will speak out even if they don't know the lingo, and even if others are not really listening. It would seem that humans have a need to speak out and be heard. Thus in the end, this kind of voice depends on some kind of authority or trust in oneself.

The psychological merges into the political. Hannah Arendt was interested in what she called "action-and-speech": "finding the right words at the right moments, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action." (Human Condition 26.) Paolo Freire explores this dimension of voice as authority and action.

One of the pleasures of texts, then, is hearing a kind of assurance or solidity of voice. Many of our students undermine their writing by only tentatively proffering their discourse as though with a half-bent arm--as much as to ask the reader timidly, "is this ok? will you accept this?" This stance is not surprising when we reflect that students are not accustomed to writing to communicate what they know to someone who doesn't know it, but rather as a way to be tested for whether they know what the reader-teacher already knows.

Authority of voice comes naturally to Selzer--perhaps especially from his role as surgeon. He loves to celebrate his free violation of what is most deeply taboo--cutti

ng

into the human body--and clearly loves to make graphic what usually frightens or disgusts us. He titles one of his books Letters to a Young Doctor, permitting him to put his explorations for the general public in the form of advice from a seasoned professional to a green novice:

The surgeon takes incorrigible delight in the immersion of his own body in that of another. It is a kind of love. But it is never to be confused with eroticism. Dwelling as he does within his patient's body, when a surgeon makes an incision, it is a self-inflicted wound.

Poised above the patient the surgeon is like a priest guarding and preserving fire. He takes strength from this closeness. For the body of the patient is the sun, the whorl of light and heat that radiates life into this room. It is the patient's heat that foment this work, his light that makes it visible and possible (Letters 109).

Authority of voice is most in question at the beginnings of discourse. (How do we "gain the floor" when we haven't spoken before?) If we look at the beginning of Ehrlich's book, we see an interesting assertion of authority. ("It's May and I've just awakened from a nap...&c"--cited at length a couple of pages back.) She is faced with a problem: she must establish herself as someone doing "man's work" in "man's country" in the traditional male situation of solitary explorer; yet she clearly wants to avoid the swagger and establish her credential with quietness and understatement. She pulls this off and establishes her own voice-as-authority: though in this opening paragraph of the book I sense her, as it were, trying to carry it off (needing quickly to demonstrate her ability to survive the rigors) whereas later when she gets rolling in the book she seems able to establish that authoritative voice without trying--perhaps trusting herself more.

(3c) One's Own Voice as "Authentic Voice" or Resonance.

What is the relationship of the text to the real author? This is the most controversial dimension of voice in texts. By distinguishing three kinds of voice and dividing the third kind into three, I've tried to "contain" most of the controversy about voice here into (3c)--and thereby leave the other senses of voice more solid and widely useable.

To talk about the relationship of the text to the real author is to violate the intentional fallacy. Let me pause a moment and justify this practice on

theoretical grounds.

Authentic Voice and the Intentional Fallacy: A Short Argument

Always there are two "authors" for any text: the implied author as it were in the text and the actual historical author as it were behind the text. (Even if the text is dry or jumbled, we can still infer an implied author; and if the text is generated by a committee or a computer, those are are real authors.) What's important to note is that we always have a choice about which "author" to emphasize, the real author or the implied author: which dimension of the text to attend to, the "behind-ness" or the "in-ness."

The New Critics tell us to emphasize the implied author, saying it is a fallacy even to try to talk about the real author at all because such talk is about something we can never know: we have contact only with what's in the text, we can never have contact with what's behind the text. (In truth, Wimsatt and Beardsley took a more moderate position in their original essay than what has come to be the doctrine of "the intentional fallacy." They allow written biographical material.)

But just because the real author and her intention are invisible, that doesn't mean they are unknowable. It's a matter of where we put our attention. Think about Polanyi's example of a blind person using a cane. It's true that her hand has no contact with the street; only with the handle of the cane. Must we conclude that her inferences about the street represent an "extensional fallacy"? Obviously we can attend "through" something to what is beyond or behind it.

Thus our choice about whether to emphasize the implied author or the real author is really a choice where to attend--a choice about modes of reading. When we emphasize the implied author or "in-ness," we tend to treat the text as whole, integral, complete--to put a kind of frame around it. The New Critics show us how much this helps our reading: we make an act of faith that the text, even if it seems peculiar, is just as it ought to be, and our job is to find the rightness and coherence in that peculiarity. And correspondingly they show us how bad it is for our reading if we say, "Oh dear, Shakespeare seems to have been nodding here and didn't put down what he meant to say." Or, "This Anglo Saxon text seems odd here so there must be a Papist interpolation."

When, on the other hand, we emphasize the real author or "behind-ness"--refraining from putting a frame around the text--we allow ourselves to think about a real person who wrote the text, allowing ourselves to make guesses about her intention. Thus we allow ourselves to think about the text as "damaged" or "incomplete" in the sense of not quite managing to say well or completely those things which (we infer from cues in the text) the writer was trying to say. In short, we allow ourselves to look at a text as showing "readable" signs of a writer's intention which lie behind the text.

The theory of the intentional fallacy grew out of work on established literary texts. Work on student texts compels us to look again at the theory. As teachers we have to permit ourselves, sometimes at least, to talk about "damaged" or "flawed" or "incomplete" texts--texts in which real authors did not achieve their intention but in which we, if we're good readers, can sense those intentions.

Yet teaching doesn't ask us simply to deny the intentional fallacy. We need both ways of reading texts. That is, we need to be able to play dumb with students about intentions or "behind-ness" and say, "Oh, did you really intend

that? I had no idea. From what you actually wrote, I took your meaning to be ----- and your attitude to be -----." Yet is there a good teacher who doesn't also play smart about intentions and "behindness" to read subtly and make good guesses--in order to detect faint or half-realized intentions in student writing? We can often help students realize their intentions better if we can see them. If we cannot see them most of our advice will be misguided. (And of course it's not just student writers who have intentions they are not aware of--but which good readers can sometimes see.) Most good writing teachers are subtle readers who happily violate the intentional fallacy--listen for authentic and inauthentic voice--despite what they say in their literature classrooms. (Example: a student drifts into a breezy or coy tone which we sense is false--and we have a distinct impression that he has begun to be frightened by what he is on the brink of saying.)

Both kinds of reading can fairly claim to be "careful reading." The New Critical emphasis on "in-ness" and implied author is careful by insisting on finding every scrap of meaning and coherence in the text as it is. This approach insists on figuring out how a text functions when posited to be a working organism. The other emphasis--on "behind-ness" and real author--is careful reading in a different way: it insists on looking at the text not only for what's there but also for cues about what's (in a sense) not there--or behind it. This latter approach is of course risky: how presumptuous of us to make these guesses, whether with proven artist or beginning student. We know we are often wrong. But good reading and good teaching depend on the ingrained human tendency to make these dangerous inferences.

Authentic Voice or Resonance in Selzer

If we want to give ourselves permission to talk about the relationship of a text to the actual author, literary essays like those by Ehrlich and Selzer are a good place to start. Both essayists write about their own reactions, experiences, and perceptions. They imply they are being honest, they engage in significant and striking self-revelations, and they convince me for the most part of their honesty. Yet they also clearly "perform" and adopt or create voices. Selzer in particular loves to dramatize himself and play with different voices and roles.

But when we've read enough of some writer, we sometimes sense that certain passages are particularly strong or "right"--have a reassuring resonance--because they are somehow in the right relationship to the writer. This is not a question of sincerity. When words are sincere, they fit only the writer's conscious intentions. We have all had the experience of hearing perfectly sincere words which nevertheless don't ring true or solid because they don't take account of important feelings or character facets of which the speaker may be unaware. ("I just know I'm not angry." "I promise I'll have my paper in on time.") When words are resonant, they fit the whole person--including his unconscious. For a famous literary example, D. H. Lawrence claims that Melville had a characteristic voice with a certain moral earnestness (a distinctive recognizable voice, as in 3a), but that this voice was nevertheless "false" because it left out a larger, deeper amoral vision which he found central to his best work.*

*The artist was so much greater than the man. The man is rather a tiresome New Englander of the ethical mystical-transcendentalist sort: Emerson, Longfellow, Hawthorne, etc. So unrelieved, the solemn ass even in humour. So hopelessly au grand sérieux you feel like saying: Good God, what does it matter? If life is a tragedy, or a farce, or a disaster, or anything else, what do I care! Let

To illustrate resonance or authentic voice in Selzer, consider two passages which are both in a sense about the physical love of a patient's body. I've already provided the first passage a page ago ("The surgeon takes incorrigible delight in the immersion of his own body in that of another...&c.")

Compare that passage with this one:

From the phone I see her [a nurse, Ora Guilfoyle] approach the next patient. She takes out her bandage scissors as though to begin removing the dressing from the man's leg. All at once I see her move to the head of the bed. She bends to peer into the face of the man lying there. Suddenly, she flings herself upon his body. One knee on the bed, and she is aboard, her skirt hiked. Now she straddles the man and bends to clamp his mouth with her own. As though her tongue were a key that would unlock the secret that lay in his body if only she could find the right way to insert it. She beats his chest with her fists, and huffs, blowing into a grate to keep a meager ember alive. The whole bed rattles and slides.

Such a passion would raise the dead. And so it did. Almost at once the man groans. A breath is taken. Another. Ora straightens, lifts her bruised purple lips away, pressing her mouth with the back of her hand, daring him to abandon her again. A minute later, Ora Guilfoyle has been replaced by the machinery of resuscitation....

Ora and I resume our Rounds. I am suddenly shy, silent. I think to say something that will acknowledge this event. But I do not. I have seen this woman at her fiercest--wild and desperate. I have seen the rhythmic jounce of dead men's feet. It is best to keep silent. We finish our work and wheel the cart to the nurses' station. A woman is there. It is the man's wife. From the distance, she has watched the coupling of her husband with this nurse. The woman raises one hand as if to speak to Ora. Ora hesitates. But the woman, too, does not speak. There is a glance between them. Then they move apart, the one toward, and the other away from the bed where it took place. (82-3).

I hear more resonance or authentic voice in this tiny story than in the earlier passage about a surgeon's relationship with the body of the patient. Selzer himself puts his finger on the problem with the voice in the first passage:

Last week's letter was so full of cant and preacherei that I have been making up for it ever since by sinning all over the place (Letters 92).

That earlier voice somehow strained too hard in trying to be authoritative, avuncular, and poetic. And there is something self-regarding and stagey in the swariness of us, of his listener, of the language, and of himself doing it.

Am I saying that heightened highly crafted language cannot be authentic. Not at all. The story of Ora Guilfoyle and her patient has all those qualities. One

life be what it likes. Give me a drink, that's what I want just now.

For my part, life is so many things I don't care what it is. It's not my affair to sum it up. Just now it's a cup of tea. This morning it was wormwood and gall. Hand me the sugar.

One wearies of the grand sérieux. There's something false about it. And that's Melville. Oh, dear, when the solemn ass brays! brays! brays! (D. H. Lawrence, Studies 157-8)

might even call it "over written" or "purple"--but successfully or authentically so. The first passage has plenty of audible voice and plenty of dramatic voice. But somehow its voice isn't as solid as the voice in the second passage--it doesn't ring as true.

As English teachers and rhetoricians, we could find plenty of other ways to explain stylistic differences between these two highly written passages. But one of the advantages of voice as a critical concept is the very fact that we can make these distinctions by ear. As Polanyi points out, this kind of tacit, nonfocal awareness can be remarkably subtle and accurate. The ear is probably our most trustworthy organ of discrimination in writing.

There is an obvious objection to this analysis in terms of authentic or resonant voice. The objection would go as follows: Why mystify? Why complicate things? This resonance that you say results from the words fitting the author can be explained much more easily. The words resonate simply because they fit you: you like them. Why can't you just say you don't like Seizer's first passage--instead of saying it "lacks resonance!"

Obviously this objection reflects a simpler and more common sense model of reading. But haven't we all had the experience occasionally of reading something that we don't like--which is wrong for us (written perhaps by a personality we find repugnant)--but which we nevertheless experience as enormously powerful and resonant? Or reading something from a culture or speech community that is alien to us--but nevertheless gradually experiencing great power and resonance in it? What happens when we experience power in what we don't like or what doesn't fit us?

Or think for a moment about what makes an editor or writing teacher genuinely good. Does she get the writer to make the writing fit just her--or even fit just the market? Surely not. Rather she helps the writer learn to produce what is right for that writer. She helps the writer move or grow in the direction that will bring out that writer's own potential gifts--even if the result doesn't fit her own editorial or teacherly tastes. Reading for authentic voice, then is something subtle but natural that we all do with discourse--namely to sense not only how it fits us but to sense how it relates to the person producing it. Obviously we can only do this if we hear a lot of discourse by that person.

Obviously I have been implying here what some would call a "naive psychological realism": implying that we live in a world of distinct selves; that we are able to know something of each other through language; that language or behavior can fit the self well or not so well; and that we can sometimes hear the difference as we listen for authentic voice or its absence.

Notice that I am not, however, implying a self that is simple, single, or wholly private and autonomous. A self that is deeply social--an entity made up largely of strands or voices from others and subject to powerful forces outside itself--can of course have identity and integrity, and thus authentic voice. To take a limiting case, even committees usually have identities and integrity. Even about committees, we can sometimes say, "That memo [action] certainly doesn't sound like the Curriculum Committee."

Indeed I could have gone so far as to skip all mention of selves and authors and still have made most of my points about authentic voice. One could say that authentic voice is nothing but a matter of a text with highly consistent and integrated cues. Taking this line, inauthentic voice would not be a text out of sync with some alleged self or author but merely out of sync with itself:

voices tend to sound fake when they give mixed signals. Nevertheless, despite some recent critical theory, I'm not yet convinced we should give up talking in terms of selves and authors.

Voice in Texts as it Relates to Teaching

I've been trying to rehabilitate a vexed and fuzzy critical concept and thus sought more precision by analysis or division into three parts. I have stressed complexities. But the applications of voice to teaching are relatively simple. I conclude by summarizing the three dimensions of voice as they relate to student writing.

Audible voice. When student writing is tangled and dead and without audible voice, we can easily get the student to see the problem--or rather hear the problem--and break through to audible voice. If we get the student to read the prose outloud, he can usually hear the tangle with his ear or feel it with his mouth. Often he stumbles. Or we can read it outloud ourselves or have someone else read it. The student can usually hear the deadness with his ear. Then we can ask, "How would you say it? Tell me what you are getting at!" and usually he cuts through the tangle to clearer diction and stronger syntax--and often better thinking. (All this, note, without "teaching" or advice.)

Dramatic voice. When another student uses an odd or offensive or contradictory stance in her writing, a problematic implied author, we can ask her what kind of voice she hears in there (or get her to ask her peer group to tell her who they hear in her writing). Or if we're writing comments, we can simply describe the problem in terms of voice: "You sound so timid here. [Or arrogant, or like two different people.] Did you mean to use that voice?" This kind of comment grants the student some safety through distance between herself and her text.

Authentic voice. When writing is perfunctory and uninvested we can say, "I find myself doubting whether you even believe what you are saying." Or when, in contrast, the writing is desperately sincere but tinny and cliched, we can say, "I believe you are sincere here, but somehow it seems as though you're trying too hard to be sincere. Why must you work at it so hard? In the end I don't quite trust your voice here." (In effect, "Methinks she doth protest too much.") This is in fact a somewhat evasive comment. It reflects my suspicion that there is pressure on the language from something unaware or unconscious. I don't feel I have a right to say that to most students. But I feel I have a right to say I sense their language somehow less solid or resonant. Most of all, I find it helpful to point to contrasting passages and say, "I hear more resonance and solidity in these other spots." (They are usually spots where the student isn't breathing so hard or protesting so much--places where he is doing the work, producing a sound as it were from the diaphragm and not just from the throat.)

Authentic or resonant voice is especially important for teaching persuasive writing. As Aristotle points out in the Rhetoric, trustworthy ethos is a major source of persuasiveness. But he also notes that we are not persuaded if we sense that the "trustworthiness" is a matter of "conscious art." He clearly implies that we need to experience that trustworthiness as inhering in the actual writer. Indeed we distrust a writer to the extent that we sense him as a clever creator of personas.

Thus, even though there is not yet any critical consensus about voice, and even though the concept leads us into theoretical brambles, students quickly and easily understand talk about voice in texts. Talking about ineffective writing

in terms of voice tends to bring about quicker improvements than talking in terms of, say, heavy nominalization, passive voice, or ethos.

Conclusion

Why do I care so much about voice? I think voice is one of the main forces that draws us into texts. We often give other explanations for what we like ("clarity," "style," "energy," "sublimity," "reach"--even truth), but I think it's often one sort of voice or another. One way of saying this is that voice seems to overcome "writing" or textuality.

That is, speech seems to come to us as listener and the speaker seems to do the work of getting the meaning into our heads. In the case of writing, on the other hand, it's as though we as reader have to go to the text and do the work of getting the meaning. Speech seems to give us more sense of contact with the author.

To talk this way gets me in trouble with Derrida, of course: hopelessly phonocentric and a sucker for "presence." And I am a kind of "listening Tom" with a prurient interest in hearing voices in texts. But perhaps Derridians shouldn't be too quick on the trigger since I suspect my analysis might even aid their enterprise. For it could be said that I'm searching for what gives the illusion of presence. I'm trying to show how some texts give the sense of coming to the reader, of doing the work for the reader, and of producing genuine and direct contact with the reader--and others do not. After all not much useful critical work gets done by grand epistemological and ontological arguments about whether all discourse is essentially speech or essentially "writing." What we need are tools to talk about differences among texts. I hope I've shown voice is a crucial tool of this sort.

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